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1-14-2003

## Why Phonics Matter in Balanced Reading Instruction

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## *Selected News Release*

# Why Phonics Matter in Balanced Reading Instruction

ORONO, Maine – But where are the phonics? Right here, embedded in the context of reading and writing, say the authors of a new reading strategy and assessment book for early childhood teachers.

Good instruction applies the best combination of phonics and real reading and writing to meet the individual needs of beginning readers, according to early literacy specialists and professors Paula Moore of the University of Maine and Anna Lyon of East Carolina University. In “Sound Systems: Explicit, Systematic Phonics in Early Literacy Contexts” (Stenhouse 2003), they tackle one of the most complex and controversial issues for preschool –grade 2 educators who are increasingly besieged by both advocates and critics of rigid reading programs.

“Reading is not an isolated skill. It is a holistic process that includes phonics, lots of good literature, writing, and most of all knowledgeable and flexible teaching,” says Moore. “If we trust teachers, we shouldn’t restrict them or their students to lockstep instruction.”

“Sound Systems” isn’t about the on-going debate over phonics, however. It is a research-based resource for assessing students, analyzing phonetic skills and tailoring instruction to address the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and the class as a whole.

Proficient readers and effective teachers need and use all the strategies under fire in the reading ideology battle, Moore and Lyon agree. Phonics, identifying words in context, reading and writing for meaning, and understanding how the written language works, looks and sounds are all important and have their time and place in the process of learning to read and learning to enjoy reading.

The book outlines practical tools and strategies for teaching and assessing phonics in well-balanced reading and writing programs, designed to help teachers do what they are already doing better. The authors also emphasize the importance of recordkeeping, which is challenging but essential to ensure phonics instruction is matched to students’ needs.

In order to use assessment to guide instructional decisions, teachers must have at their fingertips what the students know, Moore and Lyon explain. Keeping track of what each student – and the class as a whole – knows and needs to know are the keys to effective phonics instruction, according to the authors. And, they say, it is the only way to avoid the criticism that teaching phonics in the context of reading or writing continuous text is “incidental teaching.”

**Released:** January 14, 2003

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Updated: 05/23/03